

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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Diane Dunn
Brigadier General
Commissioner
(207) 430-6000



David A. Richmond
Director
(207) 287-7020

Department of Defense, Veterans and Emergency Management

Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services

117 State House Station, Augusta, Maine 04333-0117
Phone (207) 287-7020 Fax (207) 626-4471

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Dear Senator Hickman, Representative Supica, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, the following report is submitted as the Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services' (MBVS) Annual Report on the implementation of the strategic plan to end veterans' homelessness in Maine, in accordance with Maine Statute, *Title 30-A: §5047 MUNICIPALITIES AND COUNTIES; Part 2: MUNICIPALITIES; Subpart 8: DEVELOPMENT; Chapter 202: AFFORDABLE HOUSING PARTNERSHIP; Subchapter 5-A: STATEWIDE HOMELESS COUNCIL.* (paragraph 9, A through D, summarized at the end of the report).

Current Situation:

Since the 2017 *The Maine Plan to End and Prevent Veterans' Homelessness* was presented to the Maine Legislature, the member organizations of the Homeless Veterans Action Committee (HVAC) have continued to meet quarterly. HVAC is currently co-chaired by the VA Togus Homeless Programs Coordinator and the Maine Bureau of Veteran's Services Claims Supervisor. Other core partners include VA HUD-VASH Program Manager, Preble Street Veterans Housing Services, VOA Northern New England; Veteran's Inc, and Maine Housing. Periodically, HVAC invites other partner organizations such as Fedcap, Maine Veterans in Need, Veterans Benefits Administration, and others, to report on issues relevant to the collective goal of reaching functional zero.¹

In addition to the quarterly HVAC meetings, a smaller group of case workers from the core groups above, meet regularly for case consultation. These meetings are to coordinate efforts and to make sure that each veteran on the "By Name List" (BNL) has an assigned HVAC organization working on their case. The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), is a case management system used by HUD, and it is used commonly by all HVAC members. HMIS contains the BNL of homeless veterans in Maine and each member organization of HVAC must ensure that the veterans they are working with are entered correctly into the system. Case consultation is an opportunity to make sure that all veterans being served by HVAC organizations, are represented in HMIS.

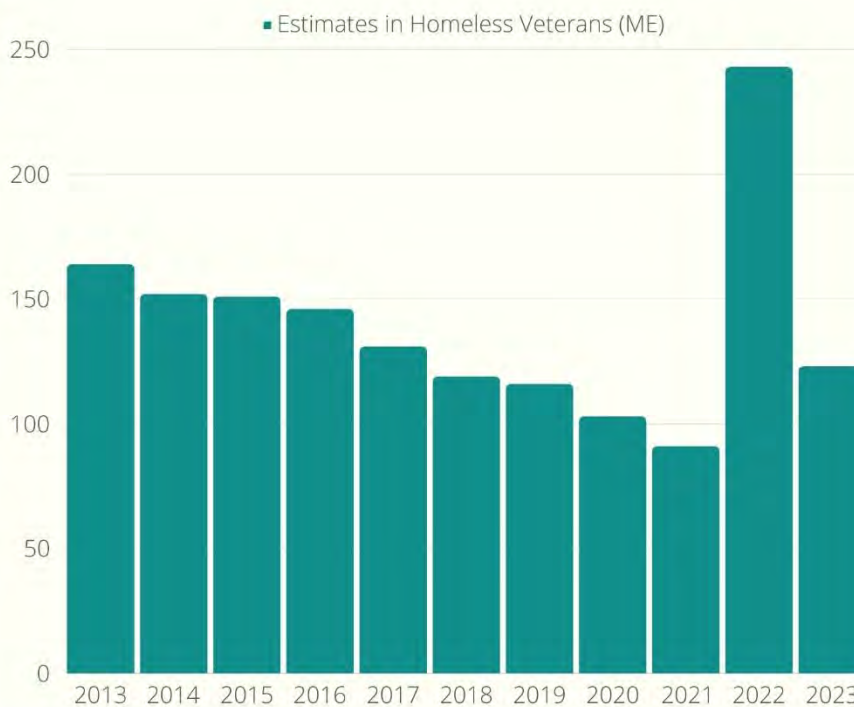
¹ "Functional zero" is reached when the number of veterans who are homeless, whether sheltered or unsheltered, is no greater than the monthly housing placement rate for veterans. In other words, there will likely always be some individuals who become homeless in a given month and others who become housed in the same month, and we do not want the former to outpace the latter.

Measuring progress:

There is still no perfect tool for measuring progress. The BNL is the chief tool for measuring the success of HVAC organizations. From 2017 to 2022, creating the BNL was a labor-intensive manual comparison for a HVAC volunteer from who compiled the list periodically for the HVAC meetings. In 2023, efforts to move the BNL to HMIS (and discontinue the manual process) to allow for more accurate and efficient reporting in real-time, have had some success. The BNL in HMIS requires standard reporting from all HVAC organizations to ensure its accuracy; moving into 2024, this standard reporting from all organizations remains a struggle and as of this report, a real-time BNL that has the accuracy desired by HVAC, has not yet been achieved.

The point-in-time survey (PIT) is another imperfect tool because it only captures a segment of the actual homeless population for that point in time, but it is useful in showing trends over time. Below is a graph that shows the annual PIT count numbers of Maine homeless veterans from 2013 to 2023. Note that from 2017, when the HVAC began to meet to coordinate the BNL and conduct case consultation, there was a steady decline until 2021 (when during the pandemic, moratoriums were placed on evictions and there was additional federal grant funding for temporary emergency accommodations at hotels). In 2022 the PIT count number spikes to more than double the 2021 PIT count, as temporary federal assistance and moratoriums expired. In 2023, our state returned to pre-pandemic PIT count estimates.

Year	Estimates in Homeless Veterans (ME)
2013	164
2014	152
2015	151
2016	146
2017	131
2018	119
2019	116
2020	103
2021	91
2022	243
2023	123

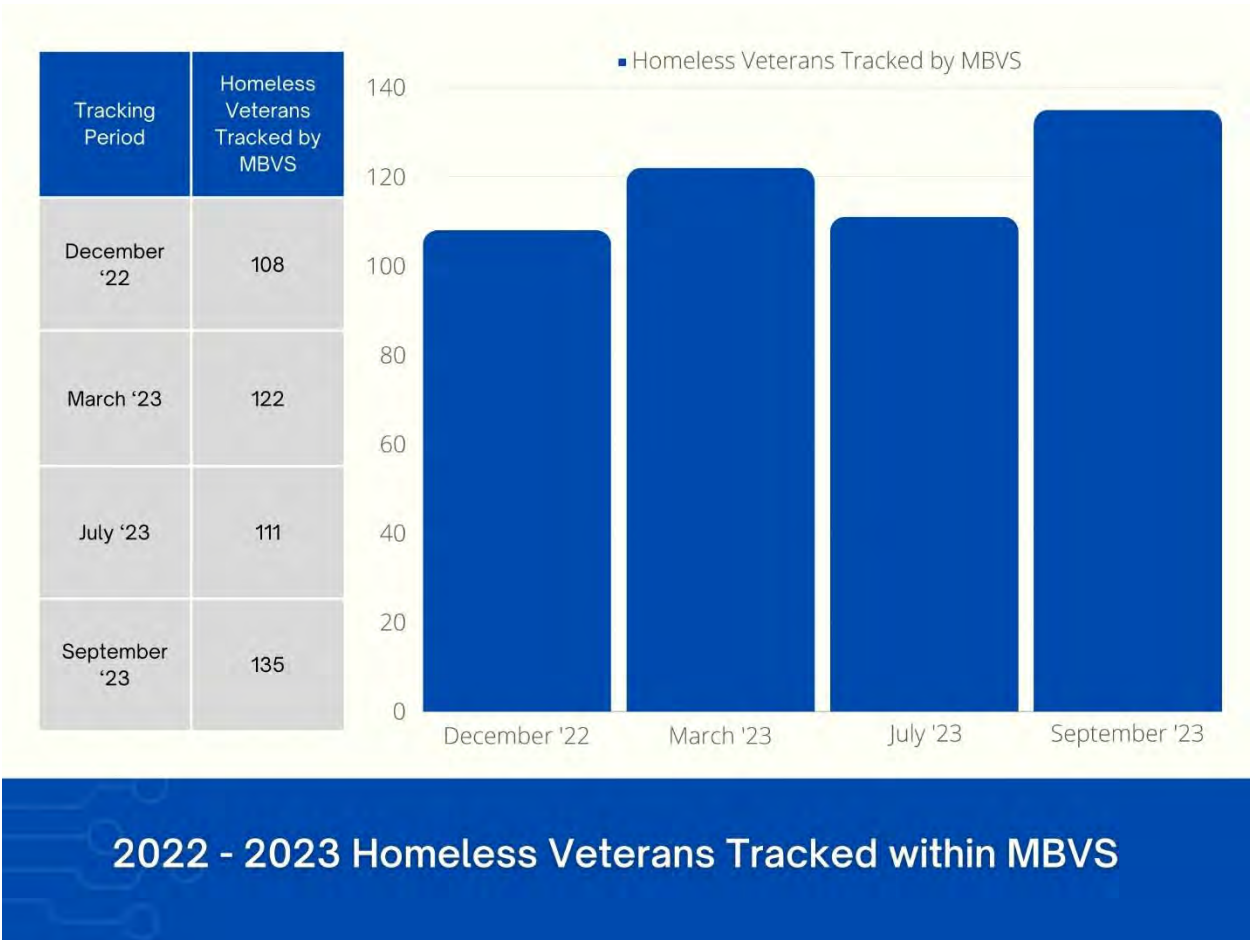


2013-2023 Homeless Veterans Point-In-Time (PIT) Count Maine

Source: Office of Policy Development and Research, Annual Homeless Assessment Report, 2023 AHAR: Part I – PIT Estimates of Homelessness in the US

MBVS maintains a case management system (IQ) designed to record interactions with veterans and their families and enhance the efficiency of service to the public. There is a workflow for each statutory mission the Bureau performs including one for the Homeless Veteran Coordination office at Togus. In addition to the tools mentioned above, MBVS records service to homeless veterans in real-time. Many veterans that are accounted for on the BNL are also accounted for in MBVS IQ. This is because many referrals to MBVS are generated in HVAC case consultation and from partner organizations who are referring veterans for one of several state assistance programs administered by the Bureau. This places MBVS in a good position to maintain an effective account of Maine homeless veterans, one that closely resembles the BNL.

Below is a graph showing the number of homeless veterans that MBVS was actively working on in 2023 at quarterly points in time, in the months that HVAC also met. Note that the winter PIT count number from the previous graph is very close to the MBVS winter number. As previously noted, the HVAC BNL is not at a point where reporting for 2023 would be useful due to the transition of all HVAC agencies to the HMIS automated reporting this year. However, as a comparison, in a recent query of total homeless veterans in HMIS and MBVS IQ for the same day in January 2024, the totals were within 28 homeless veterans.



MBVS update on progress to reach functional zero:

By state statute: Title 37-B: Chapter 7: [§514](#) §513-A. Veterans' homelessness prevention coordination:

A. Identifying homeless veterans in the State: MBVS uses outreach, partnership on the HVAC, case consultation with members, and referrals from other agencies to identify Maine homeless veterans and enter them into MBVS IQ. As part of HVAC, MBVS also ensures that the veterans are entered into HMIS for tracking on the BNL.

B. Identifying and securing temporary or permanent living space for veterans within the veterans' communities: MBVS HVC team leverages relationships with other agencies of HVAC to rapidly secure shelter for any homeless veteran that wants it. This may include an emergency homeless shelter or a transitional housing facility. If those solutions are not practical or possible, HVC staff may assist the veteran in applying for and securing a hotel rental through the Veterans Emergency Financial Assistance Program (VEFAP), administered by two vendors (American Legion and Fedcap), and also administered by MBVS. This program can secure a hotel room as inexpensively as possible to provide the maximum number of days of shelter, while a more permanent housing solution is pursued (such as a HUD/VASH voucher secured rental).

C. Providing reimbursement to human services-based volunteer organizations that provide transitional housing to homeless veterans pursuant to collaborative agreements entered into pursuant to this subsection: MBVS has a reimbursement program for transitional housing provided by agencies described in this section. There are only two agencies that currently use this program, however, MBVS has the flexibility to use the funds to otherwise carry out the purposes of this section by also using the funding as described above for VEFAP secured shelter.

D. Conducting annual outreach events, targeted to reach the maximum number of veterans in need, to disseminate information on resources and services available to assist homeless veterans. MBVS conducts these annual outreach events (called stand downs), regionally throughout the year, in partnership with other groups that also assist homeless veterans, including but not limited to: VA, VBA, Vet Centers, veterans service organizations, Preble Street, Fedcap, Veterans Inc., MDOL, DHHS, others. In 2023, We had a total of 78 veterans attend these events, 39 were homeless. Of the total, 67 were men, 7 were women, and 11 of the total were newly identified as homeless.

What is going well?

1. The concept of the HVAC and the BNL is working. This can be seen in the progress made from 2016 to 2021 in reducing the number of Homeless veterans in Maine.
2. The supportive services put in place by the Maine legislature to allow for emergency shelter and transitional housing of homeless veterans are also working. This has become a relied upon safety net when typical shelter solutions are not practical.

3. Ongoing campaigns led by HVAC members to drive rapid rehousing of homeless veterans (such as the *No Homeless Veteran Challenge*), are a collective effort to incentivize landlords, raise awareness, and rally the efforts of everyone trying to house veterans. Each of these efforts has had a positive effect.

What are opportunities for improvement?

1. The expediency of VEFAP makes it easy to jump to this option to solve emergency shelter need. For the last two years, MBVS has exhausted its VEFAP funds two to four months before the end of the fiscal year. All HVAC partners can make referrals for VEFAP. There is an opportunity to ensure that all referring agencies, have exhausted all options before moving on to VEFAP.
2. In cases where VEFAP is used, there is a gap between how long a veteran may be sheltered, and how long it takes to secure more permanent housing. Depending on which MBVS program is used to secure shelter (VEFAP is up to \$2,000.00 per veteran per year, transitional assistance is up to \$2,250.00 per veteran per year), and the cost of the shelter, forty-five days is typically the longest stay this resource can fund. It may take six-months or longer to secure permanent housing.
3. With all the variables of locating suitable rental and application process for vouchers or other assistance. Navigating this gap remains a significant challenge for all partners in HVAC.

MBVS Goals short-term and long-term, to reduce homelessness:

1. Continue and strengthen our partnership with HVAC members. Contribute to the efficacy of the BNL by ensuring accurate data capture and encouraging all other HVAC members to do the same.
2. Mirror the BNL as close as is possible with MBVS IQ. MBVS has a statutory mandate to identify homeless veterans. One of the core functions of the Bureau is to identify all Maine veterans and connect them to resources they have earned through service.
3. Continuously look for opportunities to increase low-cost housing stock for Maine veterans. MBVS is coordinating with agencies from other New England states that have successfully funded, constructed, and administered, several transitional and permanent supportive housing facilities. They have accomplished this through a mixture of funding sources. Strategically locating one to three of these facilities would be a great help in ending veterans' homelessness in Maine.

Paragraph 9, A through D, summary:

9. Develop strategic plan regarding homelessness among veterans. *Develop strategies to enhance coordination and communication among agencies and organizations that provide services that seek to place veterans in permanent housing and that seek to improve access to services known to support housing stability for veterans who are experiencing homelessness or veterans who are at risk of homelessness. The council shall develop and periodically review a strategic plan that:*

The Maine Plan to End and Prevent Veterans' Homelessness, submitted in April of 2017 to the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, remains substantially in effect, and the founding principles (HVAC, and the BNL) remain effective tools make progress towards functional zero.

- A. Establishes a baseline for homelessness in the State from which improvements can be measured. In determining the baseline, the council is not required to use the federal definition of homelessness and may include levels of housing instability or ranges of homelessness; [PL 2015, c. 465, Pt. B, §4 (NEW).]*

The BNL remains the baseline, which collects the names and situational housing information for each veteran on the list for the purpose of collective case consultation by members of the HVAC. All of the agencies in HVAC understand the eligibility criteria of each assistance program and are able to connect the veteran to the best fit based on their unique situation.

- B. Develops a method of measuring homelessness among veterans in the State to demonstrate whether efforts to reduce the number of homeless veterans in the State have been successful; [PL 2015, c. 465, Pt. B, §4 (NEW).]*

The strategic plan developed the goal of “functional zero”. This remains the goal and success is demonstrated with a constant reduction in the number of homeless veterans over time. Functional zero will be attained when we can collectively and reliably demonstrate that the members of HVAC can rapidly shelter and then permanently house formerly homeless veterans at least as rapidly as veterans enter homelessness.

- C. Identifies specific processes for improving communication among agencies that provide services to veterans, including services unrelated to homelessness, that will facilitate identification of veterans in need of housing assistance or veterans who may be at risk of homelessness and maximize resources available to address homelessness among veterans; and [PL 2015, c. 465, Pt. B, §4 (NEW).]*

Created a systemic process where all members of the Homeless Veterans Action Committee meet quarterly to coordinate; and case work reps from these organizations meet more frequently to compare case details on each veteran of the BNL, to ensure that each veteran has an advocate, a plan for immediate shelter, a plan in development for permanent housing, and that the veteran's progress towards housing is tracked on the list. Additionally, the Maine Justice Action Committee (MJAC), made up of many of the same organizations that belong to HVAC, meet regularly to coordinate issues effecting veterans involved with the justice system (incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, Veterans Treatment Court participants). Additionally, all agency members of MJAC and HVAC coordinate with other agencies that can provide assistance to veterans struggling with substance use and mental health.

D. Develops a framework and timeline for determining progress of communication and coordination efforts targeting homelessness among veterans and the effectiveness of those efforts in reducing homelessness among veterans. [PL 2015, c. 465, Pt. B, §4 (NEW).]

As described throughout this report, the framework laid out in the original strategic plan: the HVAC meeting quarterly, the BNL, the case consultation of HVAC members meeting frequently to coordinate, are all working as intended. There is room to improve on data capture to make the efforts of the HVAC more impactful; there is room to become more efficient in coordinating the right resource at the right time, to close the gap that exists between sheltered and permanently housed; and just as with the rest of the housing stock problems faced by all housing insecure populations in Maine, there is room for more and strategically located supportive housing. However, the overall assessment is that Maine is making significant progress toward the goal of functional zero.

Respectfully submitted,
David Richmond, Director MBVS